

GENTLEMANLY JOE.

A STORY.

THAT was the name by which he was known in the banking-house of Ducat, Gulden, and Ducat, or at least in that branch of it which did a thriving business in the great commercial city of Birchespool. It did not require more than five minutes' acquaintance, however, to inform the uninitiated that the apparently complimentary epithet was bestowed rather from a keen sense of humour on the part of his five fellow-clerks, than on account of any exceptional claims to blue blood in the case of Mr. Joseph Smith himself. Even the casual customer, whose knowledge of Joe was limited to watching his self-satisfied smirk and enormous watch-guard, at the other side of the shining mahogany desk, or admiring the emphasis with which he utilised his moistened thumb in overcoming the gregarious leaves of his ledger, must have been struck by the misappropriate epithet. To us, however, who had, so to say, sat at his feet and marvelled at the war of independence which he was carrying on against the Queen's English—a guerilla warfare consisting in attacks upon aspirates, and the cutting off of straggling g's—to us our fanciful sobriquet was a joke of the first water. If anything could have enhanced our enjoyment of it, it was the innocent gravity with which our companion accepted the doubtful title, and, after one feeble remonstrance, adopted it for ever as his own prerogative and right.

The circumstances of that remonstrance deserve to be recorded. Before the arrival of Mr. Joseph Smith from the paternal training-stables—his father was a successful sporting tout who had developed into a trainer—our office had been a particularly aristocratic one. Welstead, our senior clerk, was a fine handsome young fellow of twenty-six, who came of a good Scotch strain, and was occasionally understood to make dark allusions concerning the extinct Earldom of Stirling. Dullan and Moreby were Oxford men, well-connected and well-read; Little Sparkins was the son of a High Church clergyman; and I had some of the best blood of Wales in my veins. No wonder, then, that our dignity was hurt by the appearance of a loudly-dressed scorbatic-looking youth, with horse-shoe pin, and a necktie suggestive of spectrum analysis, upon the very stool lately vacated by my old college friend Vernon Hawkins

—most gentlemanly and quiet of mankind.

For a few days we contented ourselves with observing the habits and customs of the creature. There was an audacity about his vulgarity, and a happy unconsciousness of all offence, which fairly disarmed criticism. It was not until he began to address us as "old pals," and went the length of playing a small practical joke upon little Sparkins, that a spirit of resistance began to stir within our bosoms, and that Welstead, as usual, was pushed forward as our mouthpiece.

"You see, Smith," he remarked in his most languid tones, "you have been in our office for a comparatively short period, and yet you have taught us many things which were new to us. There is a natural buoyancy about your character which points you out as one calculated to shine in the most select circles. Before your arrival we had never learned to designate ladies as 'fillies,' nor had we heard of the 'real gents' whom you mention as having frequented your father's establishment. These things interest and please us. Allow us to show some small sense of the honour your society confers upon us, by christening you as 'Gentlemanly Joe,' excusing the liberty we take with your name in consideration of the alliteration."

A great part of this speech must have been lost upon Mr. Joseph, but never did elaborate sarcasm fall so utterly flat. Instead of being offended, as we had fondly hoped would be the case, he burst into an uproarious fit of laughter, and slapped his gaitered leg with the ebony ruler as a token of delight. "Haw! haw!" he roared, writhing about on the top of the high stool. "Whatever'll father say! Oh, law, to think of it! 'Gentlemanly Joe'—eh? You're right, though; you're right, and not ashamed to own up neither. I said when I was comin' up, 'Father,' says I, 'I'll teach them a trick or two,' and I have, hain't I? Of course we're all gents here, for clerks is mostly reckoned such, but it do make a difference when a man has been brought in contac' with the real thing. You can call me Gentlemanly Joe, an' pleasure, but not as meaning to imply that there is any in this room not such, though, maybe, not one of you has seen a belted hurl give your father one in the short ribs and holler out, 'You're a deep old scoundrel, Smith, and one as knows how many beans makes five!'"

Welstead's face at the idea of his gouty

and dyspeptic governor receiving such an attention at the hands of nobility was so ludicrous that we all burst into a roar of laughter, which ended our first and last attempt to take a serious rise out of our bucolic companion. It is true that his life was spent under a continual shower of small jokes and chaff, and that his new name superseded his old one, but there was a massive simplicity about the man, and a marvellous power of converting the most unpromising remarks into compliments, which rendered him a very disconcerting individual to attack. Allusions to his hat, necktie, or any other peculiarity of raiment were met by his eternal horse-laugh, and an earnest recommendation that we should allow him to send down to the country and procure fac-similes for all and each of us. "You hain't got nothin' spic'y in Birchespool," he would remark. "Lord, I know a place at 'ome where you can get your collars spotted over with fox's 'eads instead of bein' plain white, which is a poor colour at the best." I think he imagined that it was nothing but want of money which induced us to refuse to purchase these and other luxuries, and he was wont to throw out allusions as to "it's not costin' us nothink," while he jingled the loose coins in his trouser-pockets.

Town life did not improve Joseph. On the contrary he deteriorated. During the first six months that he honoured the office with his presence, he not only lost none of the traits which he had brought with him from his father's stables, but he grafted upon them everything which is objectionable in the city snob. The premonitory symptoms were a suspicious waxiness of the half-dozen hairs which adorned his upper-lip, and the appearance of a large diamond-ring with a greenish and vitreous hue. His next venture was an eye-glass; and he finally launched forth into a light ulster, decorated with a large black check, which gave him the appearance of being inside a cage, with his head projecting at one end and his feet at the other. "It's a proper thing for a gent to wear," he remarked. "When you see a get-up like this you knows at a glance who's a cad and who ain't"—a sentiment which we all very cordially endorsed.

In spite of these peculiarities we learned not only to tolerate the Gentleman, but even to like him. Indeed, we hardly knew how strong this feeling was until he betook himself into the country on a fortnight's leave, carrying with him ulster, eye-glass, ring, and everything else which

was calculated to impress the rustics and stamp him as the natural associate of the "belted hurl." He left quite a vacancy behind him. There was a dead level of equality about the five of us which deprived life of all its piquancy. Even Welstead, who had disliked him from the first, was fain to confess that he was good fun, and that he wished him back. After all, if his laugh was obtrusive it was hearty, and his quaint, vulgar face had sincerity and good-nature stamped upon every line of it. It was with unaffected pleasure that we heard a loud view-halloa in the street one morning just after the opening of the doors, and saw our friend swaggering in, more ugly, more dressy, and, if possible, more vulgar than before.

Newsome, our bank manager, was an excellent fellow, and on the best terms with all of us. As we were all single men, with a very limited circle of friends in Birchespool, he kindly gave us the run of his house, and it was seldom that a week passed without our enjoying a musical evening there, winding up with one of the choice little suppers for which Mrs. Newsome was celebrated. On these occasions, since distinctions would be invidious, Gentlemanly Joe used to be present in all his glory, with a very large white-frilled shirt-front, and another vitreous fragment sparkling gloomily in the middle of it. This, with a watch-chain which reminded one of the chain cable of a schooner, was his sole attempt at ornamentation, for, as he used to say, "It ain't good form to show you're richer than your neighbours, even if you are. Too much like a Sheeny, don't you know?"

Joe was an endless source of amusement to Cissy Newsome, a mischievous, dark-eyed little brunette of eighteen, the sole child of the manager. We had all fallen in love with Cissy at one time or another, but had had to give it up on finding that her heart was no longer her own to bestow. Charles Welstead had known her from childhood, and the affection of early youth had ripened into love on both sides. Never was there a more fondly attached couple, nor one to whom the path seemed to lie so smoothly, for old Welstead had been Newsome's personal friend, and Charles's prospects were of the brightest.

On these pleasant evenings which I have mentioned, it was great fun to see Joe darting into the drawing-room and endeavouring to secure a seat in the neighbourhood of the young lady, with a p-

found disregard for any claims her parents might have upon his courtesy. If he attained the coveted position he would lean back in his chair with what he imagined to be an air of easy gentility, and regale her with many anecdotes of horses and dogs, with occasional reminiscences of the "big nob" who had had professional relations with his father. On such occasions Miss Cissy would imitate him to his face in the most amusing way, looking all the time as demure as a little mouse, while Welstead leaned up against the piano, not quite sure whether to laugh or be angry. Even he usually broke down, however, when the two came to discuss "etiquette," and Joe, in his character of gentleman, laid down his views as to when a "feller should raise 'is 'at," and when not. The argument was generally closed by a burst of laughter from all of us, in which Joseph would join, though protesting loudly that he was unable to see the joke.

It is a proverbially dangerous thing to play with edged tools. I have never been sure whether Smith knew how matters stood between Welstead and the young lady. I am inclined to think that at first he did not. Perhaps, if some one had informed him of it then, he might have mastered his feelings, and much misery have been averted. It was clear to us young fellows who had gone through the same experience how things were tending, but we held our tongues rather than spoil what we considered a capital joke. Cissy may have seen it too, and given him a little mischievous encouragement—at least, young ladies have the credit of not being blind in such cases. Certainly Smith pursued his hopeless suit with a vigour which astonished us. During business hours he lived in a sort of day-dream, musing upon his perch like some cogitative fowl, and getting into endless trouble over his accounts, while every evening found him interfering with Welstead's tête-à-tête at the high corner house in Eldon Street.

At last the crash came. There was no need to ask what had happened, when little Joe slunk quietly into the office one morning with dishevelled hair, melancholy face, and eyes bleared with the wakefulness of a restless night. We never learnt the particulars of his dismissal. Suffice it that he was informed once and for ever that a gap which there was no crossing lay between Miss Cissy Newsome and himself. He bore up bravely, and tried to hug his sorrow to his heart, and hide it from the

vulgar gaze of mankind, but he became an altered man. What had been but a passing fancy with us, had taken root in his very soul and grown there, so that he, who had hardly known when it was planted, was now unable to wrench it out. The ordeal he had gone through chastened him to a great extent from his vulgarity by toning down his natural spirits, and though he occasionally ventured upon a "Haw! haw!" it was painfully artificial, and a good deal more suggestive of a dirge than of merriment. The worst feature of his case was that every week increased the gloom which hung over him. We began to suspect that our estimate of his character had been a superficial one, and that there were depths in the little man's soul of whose existence we had been ignorant.

Four months had passed away. None of us had changed much during that time, with the exception of the Gentleman. We saw little of him except in office hours. Where he spent the rest of the day was a mystery. Once I met him late at night in the docks, stumbling along among ring-bolts and chains, careless of the fact that a trip or slip might send him into eternity. Another time I saw a cloaked figure lurking in the shadow beside the house in Eldon Street, which fled round the corner on my approach. His naturally unhealthy complexion had become so cadaverous, that the sandy eyebrows and moustache stood out quite dark against it. His clothes hung loosely on his figure. The eye-glass was discarded. Even the once gorgeous ring seemed to have assumed a sombre and melancholy lustre, as if in sympathy with the feelings of its owner. His manner had lost all its old audacity, and become timid and retiring. I doubt if any of his rustic acquaintances would have recognised their gaudy Joseph in the shambling unkempt figure which haunted the counting-house of Ducat, Gulden, and Ducat.

The termination of Welstead's engagement began to draw near. It had been arranged that after his marriage he was to be promoted to the management of another branch in a distant part of the country. This approaching break-up in our little circle drew us all closer together, and made us the more sorry that the general harmony should be destroyed by the unhappiness of one of our number. If we could have cheered him we would, but there was something in his look, for all his snobbishness, which forbade even sympathy on a

subject so sacred. He endeavoured to put on a careless manner when he joined us all in wishing Welstead good luck at mid-day on the Saturday preceding the Monday on which the wedding was to take place. We expected then that we should not see our fellow-clerk again until he appeared in the character of bridegroom. How little did we guess the catastrophe which was impending!

I remember that Saturday evening well. It was in January, and a clear wintry sky, with a suspicion of an aurora in its northern quarter, spread over the great city. There was a slight frost in the air, and the ground clinked cheerily under foot. One of my fellow-clerks—Dullan—and I had kept by little Smith all day, for there was a wild look about his eyes which made us think it might be unsafe to leave him to his own devices. We dined at a restaurant, and afterwards dropped into a theatre, where Joe's ghastly face in the stalls had a very depressing effect upon the pantomime. We were walking slowly homewards after supper, it being then between twelve and one, when we saw a great crimson glow upon the heavens, such as aurora never threw, and a fire-engine dashed past us with a whistle and a clang, the big-boned shaggy horses whirling it along at such a rate that we only caught a glimpse of a flash of lights and a cluster of bearded, helmeted heads suspended, as it were, in the darkness.

I have always had a weakness for fires. There is something grand and ennobling in the irresistible sweep of a great volume of flame. I could moralise over a conflagration as Chateaubriand did over Niagara. Dullan is of the same bent of mind, and the Gentleman was ready to turn anywhere from his own thoughts. We all began running in the direction of the blaze.

At first we ran languidly, jogging along with many other people who were hurrying towards the same goal. Then, as we came into a quarter of the town which we knew well, we almost involuntarily quickened our pace, until, tearing round a familiar corner at racing speed, we pulled up, and gazed silently into each other's pale faces. There, not a hundred yards from us, stood the high house of Eldon Street—the house under whose hospitable roof we had spent so many happy hours—with the red flames licking round the whole lower storey, and spurting out of every chink and crevice, while a dense pall of

smoke obscured the upper windows and the roof.

We dashed through the crowd together, and fought our way to the clear space on which the firemen were connecting their hose. As we reached them, a half-naked man, bare-footed and dishevelled, was pleading with the superintendent, clutching frantically at his arm, and pointing up into the dark clouds above him, already rent with jagged streaks of ascending flame.

"Too short!" he screamed in a voice which we were horrified to recognise as that of Mr. Newsome. "It can't be—it mustn't be! There are more escapes than one. Oh, man, man, she is burning—choking—suffocating! Do something! Save her! My child—my beautiful child—the only one I have!"

In the agony of his fear, he fell at the fireman's feet and implored his assistance.

I was paralysed by the horror of the thing. The situation was apparent at a glance. There, seen dimly through the smoke, was Cissy Newsome's window, while beneath it, separated by a broad expanse of wall, was the head of the fire-escape. It was too short by a good twelve feet. The whole lower storey was one seething mass of fire, so that there seemed no possibility of approach from that direction. A horrible feeling of impotence came over me. There was no sign of movement at the young lady's window, though crawling trails of flame had climbed up to it and festooned it round with their red garlands. I remember hoping in my heart that she had been suffocated in her sleep, and had never awoke to the dreadful reality.

I have said that we were paralysed for the moment. The spell was rapidly broken. "This way, lads!" cried a resolute voice, and Charley Welstead broke in among us with a fireman's hatchet in his hand. We pushed after him as he rushed round to the rear of the house, where there was a door usually used by the servants. It was locked, but a couple of blows shattered it to pieces. We hurried up the stone kitchen stairs, with the plaster falling in strips all round us, and the flags so hot that they burned into the soles of our boots. At the head of the stairs there was a second door, thicker and stronger than the first, but nearly charred through by the fire.

"Give me room!" gasped Welstead, swinging round his axe.

"Don't do it, sir," cried a stalwart fireman, seizing him by the wrist; "there's flames on the other side of that door."

"Let me go!" roared Charley.

"We're dead men if you break it!"

"Let me go!"

"Drop it, sir; drop it!"

There was a momentary struggle, and the axe clattered down upon the stone steps. It had hardly time to fall before some one caught it up. I could not see who for the dense blue reek of smoke. A man dashed past the fireman, there was the crash of a parting lock, and a great lick of flame, like a hound unleashed, shot out and enveloped us. I felt its hot sear as it coiled round my face, and I remember nothing more until I found myself leaning against the door-post, breathing in the fresh sweet air of night, while Welstead, terribly burned, struggled furiously with the fireman who held him back to prevent him from reascending the staircase, which was now a solid sheet of fire.

"Hold back, sir!" I heard the honest fellow growl; "ain't one life thrown away enough? That little cove—him with the gaiters—the same what broke the door—he's gone. I seed him jump right slap into the middle of it. He won't never come back no more!"

Together we led Welstead round to the front once more, all three staggering like drunken men. The flames were higher than before, but the upper storey and the roof still rose above them like a black island in a sea of fire. There was Miss Cissy's window dark and unopened, though the woodwork around it was in a glow. There was no sign of the flutter of a female dress. How terrible it was to stand and wait for the end, powerless to stretch out a saving hand. Poor Welstead leaned against me, sobbing like a child. A ghastly longing came into my heart that I might see flames in that room, that I might know it to be all over, and her pain and trouble at an end. Then I heard the crash of glass falling outwards, and I bent my head to avoid seeing the very thing that I had wished for; and then there broke upon my ear a shout from ten thousand voices, so wildly exultant and madly jubilant that I never hope to hear the like again.

Welstead and I looked up. Balanced upon the narrow ledge outside the window I had been watching, there was standing a man, framed as it were in fire. His clothes were hanging around him as a few tattered charred rags, and his very hair was in a

blaze. The draught caused by knocking out the window had encouraged the flames, so that a lurid curtain hung behind him, while the ground was fully seventy feet below. Yet there, on the thin slip of stone, with Eternity on each side of him, stood Joe Smith, the uncouth and ungrammatical, tying two sheets together, while women sobbed below and men shouted, and every hand was raised to bless him. He staggered and disappeared so suddenly that we feared he had fallen, but he was back again in an instant, not alone this time, for the girl he had come to save was slung over his shoulder. The brave fellow seemed to have doubts of the strength of his impromptu rope, for he rested his own weight upon the nearly red-hot water-pipe during those twelve perilous feet, supporting Miss Newsome by the arm which clutched the sheet. Slowly, very slowly they descended, but at last his feet touched the topmost rung of the escape. Was it a dream that I heard a voice high above me say, "Hall right, missy," before a burst of cheering rang out which drowned every other sound.

Miss Cissy, more frightened than hurt, was delivered over into her half-distracted father's care, while I helped to lift Gentlemanly Joe from the escape. He lay panting upon the ground, burned and scorched, his sporting coat tattered and charred, while, strangely enough, the prismatic necktie and horse-shoe pin had escaped the general destruction, so as to present an absurd oasis amid the desert around. He lay without speaking or moving until Cissy Newsome was led past him on her way to a cab. Then he made a feeble gesture with his hand, which indicated that he wished to speak with her, and she stooped over him. No other ear but mine caught that whisper.

"Don't fret, miss," he said, "'cause it was the wrong hoss came in. He's a good fellar—a deal better than me—and did as much, but hadn't the luck."

A vulgar little speech, but Cissy's eyes got very moist as she listened, and I'm not sure that mine didn't too.

The office was sadly reduced after that. With Welstead and the Gentleman on the sick-list, there were only four of us at the desk, and the reaction from the excitement had left us anything but lively. I can remember only one remark ventured upon during that first day. The dreary scratching of pens had lasted unbroken for over an hour, when little Sparkins looked up from his ledger.

"I suppose you would call him a gentleman after all," he said.

"A very much better one than you will ever be," growled Dullan, and we relapsed into the scratching of pens.

I was present at the wedding of Charley Welstead and Cissy Newsome, when, after a long delay, it was finally celebrated. By the original arrangement I was to have figured as best man, but my post of honour was handed over to a certain very ugly young man whose appearance suggested the idea that he had spent the last few weeks in a mustard-poultice. Unromantic as it may seem, this youth not only went through his duties with all the nonchalance in the world, but danced at the subsequent festivities with the greatest vigour and grace. It is commonly rumoured that this activity of his, combined with sundry interesting anecdotes concerning horses and dogs, have so prevailed upon the heart of a susceptible young lady, that there is every probability of our having a repetition of the marriage ceremony. Should it be so, I trust that I may at last revert to my original position as best man.

THE NIGHTINGALES.

Do you forget the starry light,
The glory of the southern night;
The wooing of the scented breeze,
That rustled all the shadowy trees;
The tinkling of the falling streams,
That mingled with our waking dreams;
And, echoing from the wooded vales,
The nightingales, the nightingales?
Do you forget how passing fair,
The Moorish palace nestled there,
With arch, and roof, and coign, and niche,
In carven beauty rare and rich;
With court, and hall, and corridor,
Where we two lingered, o'er and o'er,
While blent with old romantic tales
The music of the nightingales?
Do you forget the glowing noon,
When by the fountain's rhythmic tune,
We talked of all that once had been,
And peopled the calm lovely scene,
With stately forms of elder times,
Of history's lore, and poet's rhymes,
And feasts o'er which our fancy pales;
And thrilled through all, the nightingales?
Do you forget those evening hours,
Laden with breath of orange flowers?
When we, from ruddy ramparts gazing,
Saw the snow peaks in sunset blazing;
While Darro sang his ceaseless song,
Sweeping his alce banks along;
And leaning on the gallery rails,
We listened to the nightingales?
And in the flush of dying day
Down, far below, Granada lay;
While chiming from her hundred towers,
Her bells pealed out the vesper hours;
And in the soft warm scented hush,
The Vega smiled through roseate blush;
And, ringing through her flowery vales,
Rose up the song of nightingales.

Do you forget? The wakening year,
Is grey and cold and dreary here;
Needs but to close our tired eyes,
And see the lovely pageant rise;
Of fairy halls, and rose-crowned hills,
And sweeping elms and dancing rills;
And, ere the sunny vision pales,
Once more to hear the nightingales.

SHILLINGBURY SKETCHES.

NO. VII. OUR FARMER.

SIMON DEVEREL, of Cobb Hall Farm, was our farmer par excellence in Shillingbury. There was Mr. Dredge, of White Olland, and Mr. Bullen, of Carbury, and both of these farmed much more land than Simon Deverel; but they were always Mr. Dredge and Mr. Bullen, whilst honest Simon was always Farmer Deverel and nothing else. When I first remember him he was a tall man of forty-five or thereabouts, lean and weather-beaten, with a slight stoop in his shoulders. He was good-looking, with a mass of richly curling brown hair, regular features, which would have been handsome if the elements had been less churlish, and deep, dark-brown eyes, always very tender, and often melancholy in their expression. His voice was low and gentle, and a pleasant one to listen to, though he always spoke in the richest vernacular. In short, a better-tempered, kinder-hearted fellow than Farmer Deverel did not live in all the county.

Simon had married early; but he had been a widower many years when I first knew him. His short married life had not been a happy one, and there were reports that his wife had been a lazy slattern who had killed herself with gin-drinking. Then Simon took back, to rule his house, his mother, who had gone away when the wife was brought home. There had been much bitterness of feeling and many hard words when the old woman had taken her departure. She had lived for fifteen years and more with her own mother-in-law, and she couldn't see why what had been good enough for her should not be good enough for her daughter-in-law; but the young woman's tongue was as sharp as the old one's; and, as she had behind her the support of her husband, the mother had to turn out. She went to a cottage in an adjoining village, and neither saw nor spoke to her son from the day she quitted his roof to the day when he came to her door in his mourning black, and asked her to come back to him. Very little passed between them on that occasion; and, if